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The Journey of a Successful Ex-Offender: A Case Study

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You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him find it within himself.
Galileo Galilei

Abstract: Consider that adult education has turned its focus on transformative learning and is considered a framework for both research and practice; the purpose of this study was to explore transformative learning and to consider whether it is applicable and/or relevant to the experiences of a successful ex-offender, Jonathan Queen.

Mezirow's (1975) original theory of transformative learning suggested that the learner must negotiate ten phases to achieve transformation. In the initial phase, one must experience a *disorienting dilemma*, an event that triggers one to question and critically reflect on previously held assumption thus shifting one's perspective with the ultimate goal of gleaning new knowledge. Cranton (1992) proposed a similar model with the onset being a stimulating event or situation, reflection and exploration, questioning of assumptions, reorientation and reintegration; however, she suggests that the learner doesn't necessarily go through the phases in order and may reject phases along the way. Exhaustive research has been undertaken (Taylor, 1999; Cranton & Taylor, 2012) to explore individual perspectives of transformative learning, the underlying message being that there is no consensus. Adult education has centered on the traditional classroom. Taylor (1998, 1999) raises the question of applicability in the classroom and the lack of emphasis on the learner in the process.

Newman (2010) questions whether transformative learning is just good learning and encourages scholars to focus attention on the voices on the margin (Cranton & Taylor, 2012), a challenge that underpins this study considering that there is a scarce amount of research that considers the prison environment as related to transformative learning. The field of criminal justice has historically identified punishment/ incarceration as a method to exact change in criminal thinking. The hallmark of the field has evolved to one of rehabilitation a process that involves programming to exact a change in the offender's attitude in order to return to "normal life" through therapy and education. During discussion with inmates, the recurring theme is that they won't change unless they want to irrespective of programming. Unfortunately, the recidivism rate continues to climb and attention needs to focus on this particular population. As a result of exposure to inmates and with knowledge of a successful ex-offender, it appeared that a case study that focused on his experiences could be relevant to both the fields of adult education and criminal justice.

A Case Study

Jonathan

Within the context of transformation learning theory, ours is a case study of Jonathan Queen who, as author of *Are You S.A.N.E.* (Setting a New Example), currently identifies himself as author, motivational speaker, playwright, actor, director and poet, in addition to his entrepreneurial connections.

This is a male, the oldest of 5 children of a single mother, who started life in an impoverished environment. He discloses that he began using and selling drugs at 14. At 23 he was arrested for the third time, labeled a Career Criminal and sentenced to 10 years in a Federal Prison. Previous to that were the 6 months served in a county jail and one year at a state prison on felony charges. There were no transformational theorists/practitioners involved in his transformation, rehabilitation, maturation, transition: rather and succinctly stated, his change.

Given the now self-actualized Jonathan, we conducted an interview (J.Z. Queen, personal communication, October 10, 2013) that began by questioning early life experiences, “frames of reference” that resulted in disastrous circumstances. He spoke of (1) his mother, a single parent at 16 with a drug addiction which he considered justification for doing what he wanted, to control the situation; (2) the extreme poverty, the lack of money that triggered the kind of thinking that blurred right from wrong; (3) his environment and its culture that led to criminal behavior, underscored by not having a male role model. Juxtaposed were his love of reading, acquired from his mother; his love of writing, playing with words, music, poetry and theater. He felt this defined him as who he really was. He attributes these “loves” to a 6th grade teacher, as well as to a 9th grade teacher at the then Performing Arts Center.

He walked a fine line between both sides of the street. He basked in his street life successes until apprehended. Once in prison he felt it was okay to let go of the youthful anger and rebelliousness after interacting with people who had experiences similar to his, some even more traumatic. He met people who could relate to his pain which he thought was unique only to him. So he started breaking down his negative constructs. When he showed he was capable of doing good things, people would start recognizing this and asked for help. That and his evolving new attitude led to his GED completion and effective teaching in GED and other classes. Not only with the prisoners on the inside, this would transfer to working, on the outside, with at-risk children (to whom he is very committed) and to those in corrections who felt justified in making excuses, of seeing no point in doing the right thing. Based on his book’s premise that changing one’s thinking changes who one is, he reinforces to them that they have no excuse in saying they have never seen an example of change as he tells them that “I am the example standing in front of you.” He underscores that that is why education is important because he knows now that a lot of the mistakes he made were based on not learning or knowing how to do something differently.

In a stark “been there, done that” expose, he details the many societal, personal, family, friends, and community influences that have the potential for being destructive, seductive “frames of reference.” He underscores the need for validation and approval which he achieved in prison with his teaching and mentoring. As an AHA moment, he adds, however, his real strength came when he recognized that for real change to be effective and be effective permanently: “I have to be able to validate myself”... a message he strongly advocates for others.

He advocates, equally strongly, for a sense of responsibility, sound family ties, a healthy, caring community and open communication. Now a theological student, in his book's acknowledgements he "gives honor, praise and glory to God" who he thanks for the "wisdom, words and will " to write and speak them to teach those who need to change how they think in order to change who they are, to set a new example.

We are aware of only one study focusing on prisoners using transformation learning theory to assess the effectiveness of education to promote change. Jonathan, alternatively, was his own theorist and change agent who believed in education and learned he was teachable. Since youth he demonstrated his will to be in control of a situation. He displayed this learned behavior that led to incarceration; he also displayed this ability in a positive way in the change in his thought patterns in prison, his recognition of real strength in self validation that led to the evolution, maturation, transition to the person he is today. He also reflects that everyone can change; many prisoners adamantly voice that they will never change until/if they choose to do so.

Jonathan assumes the role of example of what can be effected through change: "we start by changing how we think, which changes how we believe and how we feel which changes how we are seen and received by others, which changes the climate and inspires our families as well as our communities."(p.194)

Discussion

Transformative learning is a hot topic in the field of Adult Education evident by over thirty years of scholarly research by Mezirow, Taylor (1998, 2007, 2009, 2012) and Cranton (2006, 2012) and numerous others. Unfortunately, there is relatively little research about transformation in prison even though the number of incarcerated adults has reached an unprecedented milestone, 1 in every 99 adults, 2.3 million Americans (Versey et.al. 2009). Obviously, rehabilitative efforts are not working to deter crime. So we chose to do a case study of Jonathan who learned to rewrite the script of his life story. Through the process of self-reflection and reaching out to others who were receptive to his help, Jonathan began the process of thinking in a new way that changed his behavior and perspective.

Others discussed change within the walls of the maximum security prison in Grateford, Pennsylvania where a group of long-term male prisoners, the "LIFERS, crafted a model they needed to change the culture of violence and crime, to explore "new ways of thinking" (Harris, 2009). Harris and others within the field of criminal justice conducted research using the concept of transformation a "mentally rewriting the script of one's life" (p.148). Many definitions of transformation were offered by the researchers and members of the LIFERS group. One member, Sterling, described transformation as a "decision to build where we once tore down, to become protectors of the community instead of those who harm it" (p.144). Another member, Cleveland, didn't consider his change to one of transformation rather "he believed he still has the old behaviors inside, but he was afforded the opportunity to dig deep inside and asked what he could do differently, a cognitive change, thinking in a new way" (p.148).

Newman (2010) similarly suggests that one is internally the same person as when a child (p.44) and that good learning can occur at any point in one's life. Considering the process of

good learning, Newman (2010) proposes nine aspects: instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate, and moral. The thread that is woven throughout the nine aspects is the responsibility of the learner to manage the environment, to reach out to others, to join with others, to come to know and to act to rectify the wrongs. For many it's an awakening from self-involvement to an awareness of the impact one's decisions have on others as it did with Jonathan and the "LIFER" members .

The Importance of Education

For Jonathan the *instrumental aspect* of good learning involves the managing of the physical environment, the skills and tasks necessary for learning to occur. Jonathan discusses his experiences of volunteering to teach GED classes in prison, of being given the responsibility to create the curriculum that would be engaging and challenging to the students. Considering the *political aspect*, Jonathan was able to identify and correct the gaps in the educational program in the prison. He learned Spanish out of necessity to meet the needs of the Spanish speaking population and introduced algebra to men who had little success in early education. Being able to *communicate* with one another on the same level, to meet them where they are became the hallmark of Jonathan's experiences of learning and teaching.

Letting go of Anger

Jonathan learned to change the way he responded to the world by developing relationships and finding common ground by sharing life's struggles and developing empathy for people different from himself. Letting go of control allowed him to be open to others thoughts and beliefs allowing him to *communicate*, to listen and respond, and to engage in healthy debates and discussions. Through the process of reflection and empathy Jonathan was able to let go of the anger and blame he carried towards his father, the world, and especially towards himself.

Personal Learning for Change

The *interpretive aspect* helps to understand and define personal life experiences, to uncover bias and weakness and to make meaning for oneself. For Jonathan, the process of change and growth in learning continues to create new avenues of learning for himself and those around him. He discusses how he learned to teach others to teach, to be teachable himself; he learned how to form relationships, to have empathy for others, and above all learned to change and changed to learn. An "AHA" moment occurred for Jonathan when he recognized that permanent change could only occur if he was able to validate himself, to develop an internal sense of accomplishment rather than relying on others to give him credit. Earlier in his life when he felt his accomplishments were not being noticed he would respond by getting angry, returning to the cycle of crime to get attention, getting stuck again in the revolving door of incarceration. Breaking out of that cycle changed the way he responded to the world and the world to him.

Insights into Learning to Change

Inspiring others to exact change led Jonathan to learn how to "teach other people to teach". He assessed inmate's illegal skills and turned them into legal skills and incorporated them into the prison classroom curriculum: for example, the real estate agent teaching how to

legally buy, rehabilitate and sell a house, or the disgraced politician teaching politics. Through the process of learning to change criminal thinking to positive constructive behavior, developing a *moral* compass, learning right from wrong, not only benefits the learner but also the community the person will return to. For Jonathan his empowering journey began when he looked in the mirror and was able to see within his soul, which inspired him to take responsibility for the hurt he caused others, to then forgive himself; see the power within himself, to become the change he desired. Through his actions and his continued dedication to reach out to others, Jonathan has confirmed and validated his belief that **“when we change the way we think we change who we are”**.

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